

New Refuge Visitor Center a 2015 highlight

by Andy Loranger



Winter is a great time to visit the new Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center.

Almost universally, Alaskans share a ‘sense of place.’ I think this is borne out of a special pride associated with living in one of most of beautiful places on Earth, and with knowing that we not only meet, but with gusto embrace, the unique challenges that living here brings. For most Alaskans, much of this pride is deeply rooted in the opportunities we have to connect with the natural world around us—with bountiful fish and wildlife and the spectacular wild places they inhabit—and in meeting the challenges associated with developing outdoor skills.

Alaskans also know that an innate responsibility

of living here is hosting visitors, and we very much look forward to sharing our homes and lifestyles with visiting friends and family. With most, this involves sharing our passion for the outdoors. How fortunate we are that world-class opportunities to hike, fish, ski, bike, float, climb, camp, hunt and watch and photograph wildlife literally lie right beyond our front doors. And how cool is it to almost invariably hear the reaction, “wow, this place is spectacular!”

This past May, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge opened its new Visitor Center adjacent to our headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna. From the incep-

tion of planning this new facility, our overarching goal was to somehow convey this special sense of place to visitors, young and old alike, and to highlight how the Refuge contributes to it. While no building or interpretive exhibit can ever match the ‘real deal’ of experiencing a Refuge outdoor adventure—be it an upper Kenai River float through the Canyon, landing a trophy rainbow below Skilak Lake, an overnight stay in a remote cabin, or hiking Skyline Trail—our hope was that the facility would enrich experiences by providing visitors unique insights into the natural wonders of this amazing place we call home, and encourage them to further explore and enjoy all that the Refuge has to offer.



“Majesty of the Kenai” greets visitors to the new Kenai NWR Visitor Center.

A tour of the new Visitor Center interpretive exhibits provides a glimpse of how the Refuge’s vast, intact and interconnected ecosystems have throughout history supported people and continue to do so today. One gets a deeper understanding of how salmon, moose, Dall sheep, brown bears and other fish and wildlife depend upon healthy alpine, boreal forest, riverine and wetland habitats on the Refuge, from Icefield to Ocean. Visitors can also garner insights into Refuge’s role in conserving our natural heritage and how challenges posed by climate change must be met to ensure that these resources enrich the lives of our children and grandchildren and continue to shape their sense of place.

We’ve been overwhelmed by the positive reac-

tions of our visitors and communities to the new Visitor Center. Several hundred people joined us for the Grand Opening ceremony in late May, and visitation in the few months since has kept us hopping and exceeded all of our expectations. Tour companies are already making the facility one of their scheduled stops, with more expected to do so next year. Our summer family Explorer and Saturday showcase programs in the new outdoor amphitheater were an immediate success. Perhaps to no one’s surprise after first glimpsing it, the bronze moose statue “Majesty of the Kenai” which greets folks at the building’s entrance has quickly become one of our area’s favorite photo stops, no doubt already gracing many photo albums.

The interactive nature of the interpretive exhibits has been a big hit, especially with families, and many have remarked about how they enjoy finding something new every time out. Visitors love to relax in the lobby, take in a film in high definition in the spacious multi-purpose room, and browse the many gift selections in our expanded Alaska Geographic sales outlet. This winter, many visitors are gathering around the masonry heater before or after hiking Refuge trails or skiing on Headquarters Lake.

In August, the Refuge was privileged and honored to be recognized by the Kenai Peninsula Tourism and Marketing Council for the new Visitor Center’s 2015 contributions to supporting the region’s tourism industry. We are also thrilled and extremely grateful that it is now quite likely that you will be greeted by one of several new volunteers at the Visitor Center’s front desk, community members who are very excited and eager to share information on the Refuge. The Refuge Visitor Center has added new dimensions and forever changed how we are able to serve the public. If you haven’t had a chance to make it out for a visit, please do soon. Next year marks the Refuge’s 75th anniversary, and we’re planning many fun programs and activities. The new Visitor Center will provide a wonderful venue for the celebrations, and we’re really looking forward to have you join us.

From the entire Refuge staff, best wishes to all for a peaceful and joyful holiday season and a wonderful 2016. Andy Loranger is the Refuge Manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.